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Italian crime fiction between postmodern *impegno* and moral rebellion

Review of: *Politics and Society in Italian Crime Fiction: An Historical Overview* by Barbara Pezzotti, Jefferson North Carolina, McFarland & Company, 2014, 234 pp., ISBN 9780786476527, € 32.46 / £ 30.56 / \$ 40.00 (paperback).

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This book is the first study in English to focus on Italian crime fiction not only by providing an analysis of this literary genre from a historical perspective but also, and above all, by adopting a critical approach essentially based on the way in which crime novelists use this genre to engage with their social and political environment. This study includes a preface, an introduction, ten chapters, conclusions and a bibliography. The main section of this book is divided into three parts covering three key phases of Italy's recent history: from the origins of the genre to the Fascist period; from post-Second World War to the 1970s; and from the 1980s to the present day. At the beginning of each part an introductory chapter provides an account of the main historical and social events of the period together with an overview of the crime fiction output of the time followed by chapters that focus on specific authors: Augusto De Angelis, Giorgio Scerbanenco, Leonardo Sciascia, Lorian Macchiavelli, Andrea Camilleri, Massimo Carlotto and Marcello Fois.

In her Preface and Introduction, Pezzotti explains the importance and the essence of this study: 'Through the analysis of writers belonging to different and crucial periods of Italy's history I articulate the different ways in which individual authors exploit the structures and tropes of the genre to reflect the social transformations and dysfunctions of contemporary Italy. By investigating the works of seven writers in the social and political context in which they were written, my book also becomes an investigation in Italy's recent history' (p. 2). By taking as its point of departure the privileged relationship between the crime novel and its socio-historical context, Pezzotti highlights how Italian crime fiction 'reflects upon specific and ongoing social and political issues in Italy such as a merciless industrialization of the country; loss of traditional values, consumerism and loneliness in the urban environment; criminal organizations; the North and South divide and a problematic national identity; political instability and unresolved questions of democracy, freedom and illegality' (p. 2). However, the crucial point of this study is Pezzotti's perspective, which is deprived of snobbism and prejudice on the ways in which the genre confronts social and political setting, making thus a case for Italian crime fiction as an instrument of social and political critique and commitment. By making

reference to Giuseppe Petronio's theoretical approach and Pierpaolo Antonello and Florial Mussgnug's concept of postmodern *impegno*, as well as suggesting the use of the term *rivolta morale* (moral rebellion) as a starting point and fundamental tool in the critical analysis of this literary and historical context, Pezzotti explains that a wide range of authors can be included in the family of socially and politically-engaged writers. As Petronio has argued, referring for instance to Scerbanenco '[il giallo italiano] diventò uno studio realistico caratterizzato da umori passionali e ricco di interessi sociali, specchio e critica di una società. [...] Diventa così movente per la scrittura di un libro la rabbia, una rabbia sdegnata contro una società che lo scrittore vede... e la sua è una ribellione contro questo mondo'.¹

In other words, this book shows that it is fundamental to recognize that literature, as any other form of art, reflects people's activity, creativity and needs, consequently it evolves through times, shaping up and changing its features, which are socially, culturally and historically defined. A socio-political and historical perspective on the analysis of crime fiction as well as of any other literary genre is therefore essential in order to eradicate the misleading prejudice in relation to the highbrow literature (*letteratura*) and lowbrow literature (*paraletteratura*) dichotomy and offer new models of critical analysis which can be applied to single authors and single texts and take into consideration not only the author's literary style and narrative innovation but also, and above all, the actual development of the literary genre, its role within the wider literary context and its connections with the way in which history and society evolve.

In her conclusions, Pezzotti claims that 'the aim of this book was to see if these crime fiction authors could be considered committed writers, in spite of not corresponding to the ideal portrait of the "organic" writer of the Italian literary tradition' (p. 183) and assumes that all the authors analysed in this work 'are committed writers according to the definition of postmodern commitment coined by Antonello and Mussgnug, and "moral rebels"' (p. 188). Although it is true that by tackling topical issues such as political corruption, urbanization and foreign immigration, Italian crime fiction is at the forefront in reflecting the dramatic changes that have occurred in Italian society in the last one-hundred years, it is arguably not fully clear, as Pieri claims,² if, and to what extent, contemporary *giallisti* such as Lucarelli, Fois, Camilleri and many others are actually genuinely and truthfully committed or, as Jennifer Burns argues, if their renewed form of *impegno* is due to 'a cynical cashing-in on the *Zeitgeist*'.³ Putting aside all doubts, it seems clear that the main valuable merit of this study is to offer a new critical approach which aims to examine literary texts in line with the renewed concept of *impegno* by recognising the closeness of this genre to its readers and their problems, needs and expectations. This is an essential anthology of selected writers which lays the foundations and paves the way for further detailed critical analyses of individual authors and works of this fascinating literary genre.

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¹ G. Petronio, *Sulle tracce del giallo*, Roma, Gamberetti Editrice, 2000, p.106.

² G. Pieri, 'Letteratura gialla e noir degli anni Novanta e impegno', in: P. Antonello & F. Mussgnug (eds), *Postmodern impegno: Ethics and commitment in contemporary Italian culture*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2009, pp. 289-304 (p. 301).

³ J. Burns, *Fragments of 'impegno'*, Leeds, Northern Universities Press, 2001, p. 184.